SUMMARY

AUGUSTINE ON THE RELATIONS BETWEEN THE LIVING AND THE DECEASED:
A DISCOURSE-LINGUISTIC COMMENTARY ON DE CURA PRO MORTEM GERENDA

This thesis offers a commentary on the text of De cura pro mortuis gerenda, written by Augustine. It includes clarifications of the text structure, the argument, the phraseology of the author, and the historical setting in which the text functioned initially.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) wrote De cura pro mortuis gerenda at an advanced age. We are not able to determine the year of writing exactly, but probably it was written between 421 and Easter 424. Augustine started his career as a rhetoric teacher. His education had made him familiar with the literary canon of his time and he was a trained reader of classical Latin authors like Cicero, Varro, Sallust and Virgil.

Like many of his writings, De cura was written in answer to a question. Augustine’s colleague Paulinus, bishop of Nola in Southern Italy, had asked him by letter about the use of burying the deceased ad sanctos, in the vicinity of a martyred saint. As a bishop, Paulinus administered the memorial of Felix of Nola.

In De cura pro mortuis gerenda Augustine’s opinion on the use of burial ad sanctos appears to be different from the general opinion of his contemporary audience. This thesis thoroughly discusses the linguistic devices the author deploys in order to present his deviating interpretation convincingly to his audience.

From the fourth century onward, burial ad sanctos had been a popular ritual among Christians. They expected the physical presence of the deceased martyr to protect the graves of the dead against violation. Moreover, the martyr was expected to assist the deceased at the Last Judgement. A certain Flora, for instance, had requested Paulinus to bury her untimely deceased son ad Felicem. After performing this ritual, Paulinus wrote a letter to his colleague Augustine, inquiring about the value of burial ad sanctos. Nowhere in De cura Augustine appears to assign any direct benefit to burial ad sanctos. However, he does not altogether repudiate this ritual either, knowing that people in his environment attach great value to a grave ad sanctos. He therefore proposes an alternative interpretation of this ritual. It is not the place of burial that benefits the deceased, but the fact that the place near the memorial of a martyr reminds the relatives of the deceased of their duty to pray for them. In Augustine’s opinion, prayers, the Sacrifice of the Mass, and almsgiving are the only rituals by which the living may assist the deceased.

The value of burial, the use of a grave ad sanctos, and the importance of intercessory prayers on behalf of the deceased together form the main theme of the first part of De cura pro mortuis gerenda. In order to make clear to his audience that burial ad sanctos does not offer any direct protection of the deceased by the martyr, but rather serves as a stimulus for intercessory prayers by the relatives of the deceased, Augustine has to draw from the whole array of his rhetorical skills and mobilizes several persuasive strategies.

At first sight, the second main part of De cura seems to focus on a different, albeit related, subject: the occurrence of dream appearances. To date, the relation between the two main parts of the treatise has not been discussed satisfactorily. Klöckener (2002a: 183) in his lemma on De cura in the Augustinus-Lexikon, states that the text does not form a systematic-theological treatise. Rather, the themes are developed associatively: “Das Werk ist nicht
In Augustine on the Relations between the Living and the Deceased I advance the thesis that the narrative sections in the second main part of De cura pro mortuis gerenda do not form a digression, and are certainly not related to the first main part in a mere associative way. As a matter of fact, they play a central role on the main line of the argument of the treatise. This becomes clear not only from the content of the narratives, but also from the way in which they are phrased. An analysis of the narratives in the second part of De cura and a comparison with other versions of the same stories show that Augustine carefully selects and sets in order his narrative material, shaping his narratives into arguments which support the point he wants to make regarding the issue of burial ad sanctos. This applies to stories about events in Augustine’s own life, but also to narratives derived from written sources, among which scriptural narratives. In order to clarify the argumentative value of Augustine’s narratives, the present commentary does not only discuss words and phrases, but also larger units of text.

The study consists of a general introduction and a commentary on the details of the text. In the general introduction, information is offered about the context in which De cura pro mortuis gerenda was written and about the approach chosen for its analysis. Chapter 1 introduces a number of persons that play a part in the text: the author, Augustine; bishop Paulinus; Flora; and Augustine’s mother, Monica. The second chapter gives background information on the themes of death, burial and the hereafter. Chapter 3 explains the methods used in analysing the rhetorical structure of De cura pro mortuis gerenda. The introductory chapters are followed by the commentary proper. In order for the reader to keep track of the structure of the text as a whole, the text has been divided into thematically coherent clusters of sections. Each of these clusters is preceded by an introduction which clarifies its structure and the themes addressed. These introductions also offer background information on relevant topics that play a central part in Augustine’s oeuvre in general, such as the relation between body and soul, God allowing evil, and Augustine’s view on miracles.

In order to arrive at a coherent interpretation of the text of De cura pro mortuis gerenda as a whole, the writing of a ‘traditional’ philological commentary on the level of single words and phrases has been combined with insights derived from modern (text)linguistic approaches, such as discourse linguistics. This means that there is a special focus on the linguistic devices with which the author realizes textual coherence, like, for instance, word order, text structuring particles, interactional particles, and the alternation of tenses and modes of verbs. One of the assets of a modern discourse-linguistic approach is the possibility to discern between various text types within one and the same text on the basis of linguistic phenomena. A single text may consist of, for instance, narrative, argumentative or describing sections. Within a discourse-linguistic approach, the difference between these types of text (or ‘discourse modes’) is made on the basis of specific clusters of linguistic phenomena. Within De cura pro mortuis gerenda, four discourse modes appear to be relevant: narrative, description, argument, and report.

The analysis of the narratives in the second part of De cura pro mortuis gerenda has profited much from studies by Labov (1977) and Fleischman (1990) on the global structure of narratives. In these studies, it is assumed that a prototypical narrative consists of an introduction (who, what, where), a complication, a climax and a denouement. An investigation of Augustine’s narratives in De cura pro mortuis gerenda shows that the author
enhances the argumentative force of his narrative by a skilful displacement of the climax of the narrative.

In addition to the theory of the global structure of narrative as described above, use is made of a number of basic narratological distinctions, for instance the distinction between text, story, and fabula: the text as it has been worded; the story as it has been focalized by either an external narrator or by one of the characters; and the events that make out the content of the narrative. By making this distinction it becomes clear, among other things, that in one of the narratives in *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* the narrator has rearranged the chronological order of events (the fabula) with an eye to the argumentative function of the narrative.

The three particular approaches that were combined in the analysis of the text (discourse linguistics, Labov’s theory of global narrative structures, and narratology) have in common that they investigate texts in the communicative context in which they function. When we apply them in combination to *De cura*, we can make a number of interesting observations on the text that would remain underexposed in an investigation of linguistic phenomena on the level of words or phrases.

The combined approach also helps to interpret the text of *De cura* as a coherent unity. The coherence of the text and its argumentative structure become clear from the following summary.

In the introductory sections 1.1-1.3, Augustine offers an outline of the issue raised by Paulinus about the use of burial *ad sanctos*. The first main part of *De cura* (section 2.3-9.11) is framed by a quotation from Virgil, *Aen.* 6.327-328: “He¹ may not carry them over the dreadful banks and hoarse-voiced waters until their bones have found a resting place” (tr. Rushton Fairclough-Goold). Augustine opposes this text (which contains a generally accepted view of his time) to the text of Lc. 12.4: *nolite timere eos, qui corpus occidunt et postea non habent quid faciant*; “do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more” (NRSV). Although Augustine encourages his readers to show mercy to their fellow humans by burying them decently, he rejects the absolute necessity of burial. He reassures his audience that, if in a situation of war or natural disaster burial is impossible, this will not harm the soul of the deceased or diminish the possibility of bodily resurrection. In Augustine’s view, the martyrs understood well the relative value of burial, since they offered their lives and even the prospect of a decent burial on behalf of their conviction. For Augustine a grave *ad sanctos* does not have a greater value than a grave at any other location, except for the fact that a grave *ad sanctos* may urge the relatives of the deceased to intensify their commendatory prayers.

In section 9.11 Augustine alludes again to *Aeneis* 6.327-328. This allusion leads to a ‘hinge’ section, 10.12. In this section Augustine raises an imaginary objection: dreams in which the deceased themselves ask for burial may imply that they indeed need to be buried in order to find rest. At this point, Augustine adduces the example of Palinurus, who appeared to Aeneas and begged to be buried (*Aen.* 6.337-383). The reference to the appearance of Palinurus to Aeneas provokes a series of dream narratives in the second main part of *De cura* (section 11.13-17.21). The first sentence of section 10.12 announces this new theme of dream narratives: *narrantur uisa quaedam, quae huic disputationi non neglegendam uideantur inferre quaeestionem*; ‘There are stories about visions, that seem to introduce into this discussion a question that must not be neglected.’ The predicate *narrantur* occupies the first position in the sentence and is followed immediately by the subject *uisa quaedam*. This quite marked word order is characteristic of so-called presentative sentences and indicates that the

¹ Viz. Charon.
author will now address a new theme in his treatise. The expression *huic disputationi inferre* signals that this new issue (dream narratives) should be regarded in the light of the discussion in the first main part of the treatise, about the value of burial. Augustine’s reaction to the imaginary objection consists of three dream narratives.

In these dream narratives deceased as well as living people appear in dreams and visions. According to Augustine, the parallel structure of the first two narratives (section 11.13) shows that neither the deceased nor the living are present in person to the dreamer. From an analysis of the global structure of the narratives in terms of Labov and Fleischman, it can be concluded that these two dream narratives have the same structure: a living human is confronted with a thorny problem which is then solved by a dream appearance. In the first story, the problem is solved by a deceased father appearing to his son, in the other story, the image of Augustine appears to the dreamer – a former student of his – and explains a difficulty in a text of Cicero. Augustine is certain that he was not present to the dreamer, since he himself was in Milan while the dreamer stayed in Carthage. By means of the analogy in structure of the two narratives, the reader has to conclude that in the other case the deceased father was not personally present to his dreaming son either. The parallel structure of the two narratives in terms of introduction, complication, climax and denouement (Labov; Fleischman) can be seen as a formal means to underscore the analogy of the narratives, on which Augustine’s ‘evidence’ is based.

Section 12.15 contains a third narrative about a complex of visions during a near-death experience. In this narrative, a patient reports a number of visions in which deceased as well as living people appeared to him while he was in a coma. Among the living people that appeared to him is, again, Augustine himself. In the analysis of this complex narrative the narratological distinction between fabula, story and text is essential. In the account of the visions, the alternation of tenses makes clear that the patient first had visions in which living people appeared, and afterwards also saw dead people in his visions. In his presentation of the events, however, the narrator does not keep to this chronological order. Instead, the vision of the deceased precedes the vision of the living, and of Augustine in specific. By rearranging the events in this order, the narrator brings about a climax in the narrative. The appearance of the living Augustine, who claims with certainty that he had not been aware of his appearance to the patient, forms decisive proof that he was not present in person in the vision. As in the combined narratives of section 11.13, Augustine concludes this narrative with an analogy of the appearance of the living and the deceased. He phrases this analogy as a rhetorical question: *cur non ergo ita et illos mortuos eisdem nescientibus mortuis?* ‘Why then would this be different for these deceased, who neither were aware of their appearance in the visions?’ This rhetorical question in fact is a strong assertion: both situations are, of course, alike. In Augustine’s view, the dream narratives make clear that generally the deceased are not able to reach the living with a message. The appearances of deceased people asking for burial are only likenesses, *similitudines*, of the deceased, rather than the deceased in person.

After this conclusion Augustine discusses the way in which the appearances of the deceased to the living come into being. He hypothesizes that angels are involved, but he is not able to explain how exactly they are operating, and likes to leave this issue to the experts in the field of *diuidicatio spirituum*, the discernment of spirits. Although Augustine states that this issue exceeds his understanding, he is in firm control of his narrative about such an expert, the hermit John of Lycopolis. This narrative is also known from the first chapter of Eusebius’ *historia monachorum*, a Greek text translated into Latin by Rufinus. A comparison between Augustine’s version and that of Rufinus in terms of Labov and Fleischman shows that Augustine transferred the climax of the narrative to an earlier moment. In the story, John

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2 Viz. the actual absence of the living from the appearance in the vision.
appears to a woman who needs his advice. Whereas in the version of Rufinus the narrative comes to a climax at the moment at which John appears to the woman and gives his advice to her, in Augustine’s version the climax appears earlier, when the hermit announces that the woman will be able to see him, *sed in somnis*, but in a dream, so not in person. Pretending to present the expert knowledge of John, Augustine offers the same argument which he himself discussed in the earlier narratives (the appearance is not identical to the person or spirit himself): John appears in a dream, so he does not appear in person. In this way the second main part of *De cura* ends with a climax: the expert confirms the assumptions which the author made earlier but pretended not to be able to fully grasp.

In the concluding sections (18.22-23) Augustine does not refer to the dream narratives, but recapitulates his opinion on the value of burial as stated in the first part of the treatise: a grave *ad sanctos* is useful only insofar as it reminds the relatives of their duty to pray for the deceased. The dream narratives support the author in his opinion that a carefully performed burial is indeed desirable under normal circumstances, but not indispensable in times of great distress, whereas the commendatory prayers are always necessary.

The combined methodological approach described above enables us to interpret *De cura pro mortuis gerenda* as a coherent text with a clear argumentative structure, in which a consistent message is passed on to the audience by means of an ingenious repertory of rhetorical devices. In specific, it clarifies the function of the narrative sections in the argumentation as a whole. Applying this type of analysis to other sections in Augustine’s work in which narrative and argumentative units alternate, for instance the death scene of Monica in *Confessiones* 9, or the miracle narratives in *De ciuitate dei* 22.8, may lead to comparable interesting results.